

## Kronstadt 1921: An analysis of Bolshevik propaganda - David Schleich



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In March 1921, the Russian Revolution died. The failure of the March Action in Germany crushed hopes for a "permanent revolution" throughout Europe. The New Economic Policy (NEP), a partial restoration of capitalism and the market, was introduced that month. Treaties and trade agreements were signed with no fewer than five nations - three of which (Britain, Persia and Turkey) were battling communist insurgents (for Britain, in its Asian colonies) who quickly lost their support from Moscow (Carr 47). More than anything else, however, the suppression of the Kronstadt rebellion served to illustrate the betrayal of the October Revolution and the degeneration of the Bolsheviks into tyrants. "With the defeat of Kronstadt... the last effective demand for a workers' democracy passed into history. Thereafter totalitarianism, if not inevitable, was the likely eventuality" (Avrich 229).

The sailors of Kronstadt had once been described by Leon Trotsky as the "pride and glory of the Russian Revolution." It was a great spiritual blow when the Red Army stormed the island base after ten days of attacks across the frozen water of the Baltic. Although the Kronstadt uprising was "a modest affair" militarily (Avrich 218), it was the greatest propaganda battle the Bolsheviks had ever entered. Somehow the Bolshevik upper circles had to convince the world that they were completely justified in crushing the 'pride and glory' of the Revolution they had led. Otherwise, observers would conclude that the leadership itself had become a counterrevolutionary force and was bent on the creation of a totalitarian dictatorship in Russia.



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The first shots of the propaganda war were fired as soon as the revolt began. Government publications and announcements declared that Kronstadt had been taken over by White (Tsarist) forces. The French and other foreigners were also blamed for the conflict in other official proclamations. These groundless claims were enough to isolate Kronstadt from potential supporters until the mutiny was suppressed. After that point, however, the two stories broke down and new ones had to be invented to justify the Bolsheviks' actions. In the years following Kronstadt, the Bolsheviks and their descendants would claim that the mutineers wanted to restore capitalism, or that they wanted to destroy the Communist Party. They would claim that the population at Kronstadt had fundamentally changed and that the new petty-bourgeois sailors were simply throwing a temper tantrum. They would even claim that the collapse of strikes in Petrograd during the revolt demonstrated the solidarity of the workers with the Bolsheviks and against the Kronstadters.

The truth is that the Kronstadt uprising was not a threat to Soviet Russia. The mutineers were not anti-Bolshevik revolutionaries, they were only idealistic reformers hoping to perfect the results of the October Revolution. None of the myths used to justify the suppression of Kronstadt are accurate.

The Bolshevik attack on Kronstadt was little more than a drastic overreaction in the face of a perceived challenge to Bolshevik authority. It was inspired in large part by the dreadful Civil War, which had only ended in 1920 and had put Russia and the communists under a great deal of pressure. Many continue to cling to the old Bolshevik propaganda about Kronstadt, however, and reject this simple explanation. The purpose of this work is to present and refute the claims of the Bolsheviks, in the hope that the true nature of Kronstadt may eventually be accepted.

The real leaders of the rebellion are General Kozlovsky and his aides, Captain Burkser, Kostromitionov, Shirmanovsky, and other White Guards, who are deceiving you with promises of democracy and freedom. In actuality, they are fighting for a restoration of tsarism. (qtd. in Avrich, 145)

One of the 'classic' myths about the Kronstadt rebellion is that it was led by a White General, with the aim of restoring the old aristocracy. This was one of the first stories that the Bolsheviks created to justify smashing Kronstadt, and, accordingly, it is one of the most easily disproven. The claim that

"The White General Kozlovsky" led and organized the rebellion was created before there was even any rebellion to speak of, and it was just as quickly shown to be a lie. Consider the first-hand account of Victor Serge, a member of the Bolshevik Party who was present in Petrograd during the revolt: On the night of [1 March] I was awoken by the ringing of a telephone in a room at the Astoria next to my own. An agitated voice told me: 'Kronstadt is in the hands of the Whites. We are all under orders.'

The man who announced this frightful news (frightful because it meant the fall of Petrograd at any minute) was Ilya Ionov, Zinoviev's brother-in-law. 'What Whites? Where did they come from? It's incredible!'

'A general Kozlovsky' ...

... But even before I went to the District Committee I met comrades, rushing out with their revolvers, who claimed that it was an atrocious lie: the sailors had mutinied, it was a naval revolt led by the

Soviet... The worst of it all was that we were paralyzed by official falsehoods. It had never happened before that our own Party should lie to us like this. 'It's necessary for the benefit of the people,' said some, who were nonetheless horror-stricken at it all. The strike was now almost general. (124) Even before Victor Serge was able to report to duty, he already knew the official propaganda to be nothing more than lies. He later reported that Mikhail Kalinin, the President of Russia, invented the story of Kozlovsky upon his (Kalinin's) return from the Anchor Square Meeting at the naval base on March 1 (where the Petropavlovsk Resolution was adopted) (127).

While it is true that there was a former tsarist general at the base, it is clear from all records that this General Kozlovsky did not have anything to do with leading

or guiding the rebellion. He had been appointed to the base by Leon Trotsky as an "artillery specialist," a position which he would retain throughout the revolt. Kozlovsky did give advice to the leaders of the rebellion, such as they were.

He, and the other specialists, recommended an assault on Oranienbaum, a town on the mainland south of Kronstadt, in order to seize supplies and prepare for a march on Petrograd. He also argued that the base's artillery be used to break up the ice which surrounded the island and free the ice-bound ships so that they could take part in the battle. He even urged the Provisional Revolutionary Committee to build barricades in case of a Bolshevik attack (Avrich 138). None of Kozlovsky's recommendations were pursued by the Kronstadters, despite the fact that they would all have helped the Kronstadters in the military struggle.

This is in part due to the traditional hatred of officers and the upper classes among the Kronstadt sailors, another reason why the myth of Kozlovsky's leadership is unbelievable. "Given the sailors'

independent spirit and traditional hatred of officers, it is unlikely that Kozlovsky and his colleagues could have won real influence among them" (Avrich 101). These days one must look long and hard to find any Leninists who still hold that Kozlovsky led the Kronstadt rebellion; this myth has been abandoned even by those who created it. Although the story of Kozlovsky's leadership has been completely discredited, it was once the cornerstone of official Bolshevik policy. It was the first lie the bureaucrats used to justify the destruction of the Kronstadt rebellion, so it is fitting that it is the first to be refuted.

[The Bolsheviks] denounced the men of Kronstadt as counter-revolutionary mutineers, led by a White general. This denunciation appears to have been groundless. (Deutscher 511) On March 2, Lenin and Trotsky declared the mutiny to be a plot of "White Guard" generals, behind whom stood the SRs and "French Counterintelligence." Later on, Stalin's propaganda would go further still, claiming that the Kronshtadt rising had been financed by Washington. (Pipes, 382) The claim that the uprising at Kronstadt had been arranged by aristocratic émigrés or hostile foreign nations was another groundless conspiracy theory. It appeared in the early days of the mutiny, at nearly the same time as the story about Kozlovsky. Like the first, it is now discredited, but served for a time to convince a skeptical world of the necessity of destroying the Kronstadt insurrection as soon as possible. While it is true that "the Russians in exile rejoiced at the uprising and sought to assist the insurgents by every possible

means... it is not true that the émigrés had engineered the rebellion"

(Avrich 126). As a matter of fact, until March 13 the Kronstadters actually refused to accept the food and medicine (to say nothing of military aid) that was offered by foreigners (and even the Red Cross), despite a desperate lack of supplies (Avrich 121). Nothing ever reached the island.

As with the rebels' reluctance to heed Kozlovsky's advice, their refusal to accept aid can be linked to their hatred of the privileged classes. This is another instance in which the sailors' pride may have cost them a chance to hold out against the Bolsheviks' attack, had they been but willing to have anything to do with "the bourgeoisie." The fact that they let all of these chances slip away helps to illustrate the true nature of the revolt. The Kronstadters were in no way agents of the Whites, of the capitalists, or of the émigrés. Instead, they were simply workers and soldiers, fed up with the dictatorship that had descended upon Russia, and eager to reform it.

Our enemies are trying to deceive you. They say that the Kronstadt rebellion was organized by Mensheviks, SR's, Entente spies, and tsarist generals. Nonsense! If our revolution was made in Paris, then the moon was made in Berlin. (qtd. in Avrich 98)

The Kronstadt uprising did not attract the Petrograd workers. It repelled them. The stratification proceeded along class lines. The workers immediately felt that the Kronstadt mutineers stood on the opposite side of the barricades - and they supported Soviet power. (Trotsky 6) After the Kronstadt revolt had already been crushed, the Bolshevik authorities found themselves haunted by its memory. Rational observers soon dismissed the charges that the uprising was arranged by émigrés or White generals, and the bureaucrats needed new excuses for their actions.

These later justifications were, without exception, far more sophisticated than those that had been created on the spot. Leon Trotsky in particular spent a good deal of time arguing the Bolshevik case in attempts to recruit leftists to his anti-Stalin opposition. One of Trotsky's later claims tries to show that the workers of Petrograd opposed the revolt, which was therefore anti-proletarian. He weaves this tale by claiming that the collapse of the widespread strikes in the city demonstrated support for the Bolsheviks and opposition to the Kronstadters. A deeper look shows that this is not necessarily the case.

Striking throughout the whole of Russia had grown steadily throughout the winter of 1920-1921, eventually reaching a climax in February, 1921. The strikes and popular unrest were mainly inspired by opposition to the policies of "War Communism," which had been adopted by the Bolsheviks during the Civil War. Many Russians accepted War Communism as a necessary evil during the Civil War, and tolerated it in order to defeat the Whites. However, once the Civil War ended in 1920, opposition to the unnecessary continuation of War Communism quickly grew. Among its most despised elements were forced requisitioning of supplies from the countryside, and the "roadblock detachments," which kept starving urbanites from leaving the cities to look for food. The

"militarization of labor" into armies of workers controlled with iron discipline and an authoritarian command hierarchy was another disliked aspect of War Communism.

In Petrograd, strikes started in January and grew for the next two months. As Victor Serge noted, when news about the Kronstadt mutiny reached Petrograd in March, "The strike was now almost general" (124). As a matter of fact, the Kronstadt rebellion actually began as an action in solidarity with the strikes. On February 26, the battleship Petropavlovsk sent a "Fact-Finding Mission" to Petrograd to investigate the strikes and the situation in general. The return and report of this mission on February 28 was the basis of the Petropavlovsk Resolution, which was adopted the next day during a mass-meeting in Anchor Square. It is odd, is it not, that the strikers should be "repelled"

by an action taken in solidarity with them!

The fact of the matter is that Trotsky's claim is false, although it is not such a blatant lie as the earlier myths that had been created about Kozlovsky and the émigrés. Paul Avrich analyzes the collapse of the strikes in some detail, and has compiled a list of reasons (unrelated to solidarity with the Bolsheviks) that prompted this collapse. Among the most important factors are the armed occupation of Petrograd, mass arrests of dissidents, skilled propaganda coupled with concessions, and simple exhaustion on the part of the strikers. "Overnight Petrograd became an armed camp"

(Avrich 46), while at the same time dragnets of the city by the Cheka (the State's secret security force) rounded up hundreds of workers and thousands of students, intellectuals, and other nonworkers in just a few days (47). All the strikes were

denounced as counterrevolutionary plots and extra rations were given to the Petrograd workers. The despised roadblock detachments were removed, and news of the pending introduction of the NEP was circulated (49). Above all else, however, "the workers were simply too exhausted to keep up any sustained political activity...

What's more, they lacked effective leadership and a coherent program of action" (50). For these reasons, the strikers in Petrograd gave up the struggle only a few days after the Kronstadters joined them.

This does not reveal, however, the true reaction of the Petrograd strikers to the revolt at Kronstadt.

Although the collapse of the strikes had nothing to do with the Kronstadt rebellion, is it still possible that the strikers really did oppose the revolt? Historical evidence suggests otherwise. Victor Serge related how news of Kronstadt brought the strike "to a nearly general character" (130) and how "

pamphlets distributed in the working-class districts put out the demands of the Kronstadt Soviet"

(126). Moreover, the revolt inspired additional strikes in other cities, notably Kazan and Nizhnyi Novgorod (Figs 762). Although Trotsky's justification is more sophisticated than earlier ones, it is shown to be just as inaccurate. The claim that the collapse of the Petrograd strikes showed proletarian opposition to Kronstadt is nothing more than another attempt to cover up the tyrannical actions of the Bolsheviks with respect to the Kronstadt revolt.

[Trotsky] accused the masses inside and outside the Party of sympathizing with Kronstadt. He admitted therefore that at that time the Petrograd workers and the opposition, although they had not resisted by force of arms, none the less extended their sympathy to Kronstadt. (Ciliga 4) The insurgents did not have a conscious program and they could not have had one because of the very nature of the petty bourgeoisie. (Trotsky 6)

Although they were unable to form links between the Kronstadt mutineers and well-known counterrevolutionaries, the Bolsheviks still tried to claim that the revolt deserved to be crushed due to its very nature. In one article, "Hue and Cry Over Kronstadt," Leon Trotsky claimed that the Kronstadt revolt had no conscious program, but was simply a random uprising expressing the frustrations



of the petty-bourgeois peasantry (6). Strangely, Trotsky forgets to mention the Petropavlovsk Resolution in his analysis of Kronstadt. This is odd, because this Resolution is generally seen as an outline of the revolt's program. In full, the Petropavlovsk Resolution reads: Having heard the report of the representatives sent by the general meeting of ships' crews to Petrograd to investigate the situation there, we resolve:

1. Seeing that the present soviets do not express the wishes of the workers and peasants, to organize immediately re-elections to the Soviets with Secret vote, and with care to allow free electoral propaganda for all workers and peasants.
2. To grant liberty of speech and of press to the workers and peasants, to the anarchists and the left socialist parties.
3. To secure freedom of assembly for labor unions and peasant organizations.
4. To call a non-partisan Conference of the workers, Red Army Soldiers and sailors of Petrograd, Kronstadt, and of Petrograd province, no later than March 10th, 1921.
5. To liberate all political prisoners of Socialist parties as well as all workers, peasants, soldiers and Sailors imprisoned in connection with the labor and peasant movements.
6. To elect a Commission to review the cases of those held in prisons and concentration camps.
7. To abolish all 'politodeli' [official propaganda] because no party should be given special privileges in the propagation of its ideas or receive financial support from the government for such purposes.

Instead there should be established educational and cultural commissions, locally elected and financed by the government.

8. To abolish immediately all 'Zagryaditelniye otryadi'. [Roadblock detachments]
9. To equalize the rations of all who work with the exception of those employed in trades detrimental to health.
10. To abolish the communist fighting detachments in all branches of the army,

as well as the communist guards kept on duty in mills and factories. Should such guards or military detachments be found necessary they are to be appointed in the army from the ranks, and in the factories according to the judgment of the workers.

11. To give the peasants full freedom of action in regard to their land and also the right to keep cattle on condition that the peasants manage with their own means; that is, without employing hired labor.

12. To request all branches of the Army, as well as our comrades the military 'kursanti' [cadets] to endorse our resolutions.

13. To demand that the press give the fullest publicity to our resolutions.

14. To appoint an itinerant bureau of control.

15. To permit free handicraft production which does not employ hired labor. (Ciliga 2) The Petropavlovsk Resolution is clearly a program, although Trotsky seems to have forgotten about it. While several of the points deal only with specific grievances, one can find in the others (notably points 1 through 4) seeds of a free socialist society. The progressive program of the Kronstadt rebellion did indeed exist, despite Trotsky's claim. Again, one finds the Bolsheviks creating their own reality in an effort to justify their inappropriate actions.

These [demands] are primitive formulations, insufficient no doubt, but all of them impregnated with the spirit of October; and no calumny in the world can cast doubt upon the intimate connection existing between this program and the sentiments which guided the expropriations of 1917. (Ciliga 3)

That there were actual counter-revolutionary elements among the sailors was shown by the slogan

"Soviets without Bolsheviks." (Grant 58)

Unable to brush aside the Kronstadt revolt as an White émigré conspiracy and forced to admit that it had a conscious program, modern-day Trotskyists have retreated to the claim that the revolt was counterrevolutionary and therefore had to be crushed. Arch-Trotskyist Ted Grant describes how the revolt was committed to the destruction of the Bolshevik Party, and called for 'Soviets without Bolsheviks' (Grant 58). This is in fact not true: "Soviets without

Bolsheviks' was not... a Kronstadt slogan" (Avrich 181). A close look at the rebellion shows that the Bolsheviks were threatened in no way - the only target was the increasingly totalitarian nature of the single-Party dictatorship.

There were, of course, a large number of Bolshevik Party members at Kronstadt, which had a reputation as a center of revolutionary activity. At the end of the Civil War, the Bolshevik Party had over 4,000 members at Kronstadt a large number for such a small location. However, the end of the Civil War was followed by "a great wave of defections which reduced party membership from 4,000

to 2,000 between September 1920 and March 1921" (Avrich 183). Nearly all of the Bolshevik rank and file at the base backed the uprising when it began in March - only 300 were arrested (and by all accounts treated well) by the Kronstadters during the revolt. While this may seem like a large figure (it was at that point about a fifth of the total membership), it should be kept in mind that the Bolsheviks were under orders to sabotage and undermine the rebellion (Avrich 185). This is all the more impressive when one considers the fact that the relatives of the Kronstadters in Petrograd had been taken hostage by the Bolsheviks, who were also executing other soldiers of questionable loyalty (Avrich 187).

Also worth noting in any discussion about the attitude of the mutineers toward the Bolsheviks are the results of the elections for a new Soviet that occurred a few days into the revolt. Although this Soviet was now open to all parties (not just the Bolsheviks, as had been the case), Bolshevik party members made up a sizable minority - roughly 30% - of the delegates (Avrich 80). This makes it clear that the mutineers did not oppose the Bolsheviks - a good number of them were Bolsheviks themselves! "They were even prepared to accept the Bolsheviks in [the non-Party Soviets] provided they accepted the principals of Soviet democracy and renounced their dictatorship" (Figs 761). Nor was Bolshevik sympathy for the revolt confined to the Kronstadt Party branch. Several Red Army units that attacked the fortress nearly joined the rebellion, despite the placement of special security troops (loyal Bolsheviks with orders to shoot soldiers who wavered) among the ranks and Cheka machine-guns behind their backs. Even high officials including "Gorky,... like many socialists had supported the rebellion from the start" (Figs 767).

Even when two senior Bolsheviks traveled to the base, the rebels showed no

signs of aggression or violence. M. I. Kalinin, the President of the People's Executive, and N. N. Kuzmin, a commissar of the Baltic Fleet, attended the Anchor Square Meeting where the Petropavlovsk Resolution was presented to the base.

When [they] arrived, [they] were met by music, banners, and a military guard of honor, a hopeful sign that serious trouble might soon be averted. Moreover, the Anchor Square meeting opened in a friendly spirit, with the Bolshevik chairman of the Kronstadt Soviet, P. D. Vasiliev, himself presiding.

(Avrich 77)

Things started to go downhill, however, when the Bolsheviks addressed the crowd of more than 15,000. The popular Kalinin was heckled by the sailors after he denounced them as traitors and threatened them with "merciless reprisals;" Kuzmin, speaking after him, warned that the base's

"treason would be smashed by the iron hand of the proletariat" and was literally booed off the stage (although both were allowed to leave the fortress peacefully) (Serge 127). Victor Serge claimed that Kalinin and Kuzmin's "brutal bungling provoked the rebellion...[demonstrating that] right from the first moment, at a time when it was easy to mitigate the conflict, the Bolshevik leaders had no intention of using anything but forceful methods" (127).

The issue of negotiations and a peaceful resolution to the crisis is a delicate one to the Bolsheviks, since it contrasts most clearly the belligerence of the Bolsheviks and the peaceful nature of the revolt. After the Anchor Square debacle, the Bolsheviks made clear their intention to avoid negotiations by arresting over 200 delegates from Kronstadt who had been sent to Petrograd and neighboring areas to explain the position of the mutineers. The next step was the issue of an ultimatum on 5 March by Trotsky, who, in words that "could have been issued by a nineteenth-century provincial governor to the rebellious peasants... warned that the rebels would 'be shot like partridges' if they did not give themselves up in twenty-four hours" (Figs 762). Visiting American anarchists offered to serve as mediators in the crisis. They were rebuffed by the Bolshevik leadership and sent on a tour of Russia by train; Russians who offered to mediate were thrown into jail (Serge 128). A parley after the first day of the attack was nothing more than a trap: when members of Kronstadt's Provisional Revolutionary Committee came out to negotiate, they were taken prisoner by the

Bolsheviks (Avrich 155). No real attempt was made by the Bolsheviks to resolve the crisis peacefully, although "the chances were good that the insurgents would have responded to [such an]

approach" (Avrich 136).

The non-aggressive nature of the revolt can be seen clearly both in the publications of the Kronstadters and in their actions. The entire Petropavlovsk Resolution was written in a non-threatening tone - note Point 12, which asks for endorsement of the Resolution by other military units. Simply put, the mutineers had no interest in destroying the Soviet State; they simply wanted some of its aspects reformed such as the single party dictatorship and the excesses of War Communism. Their actions matched their words - recall that none of the common-sense recommendations of General Kozlovsky were pursued at all. While many historians argue that had Kozlovsky's advice been followed the rebellion might have triumphed, the Kronstadters had no interest in invading the mainland, freeing the battleships from the ice, or even erecting barricades in the town (Avrich 219). The revolt was not founded to attack the Bolsheviks. Rather the rebels naïvely expected the rest of Russia to rally to their cause and peacefully create a truly free Soviet state: "Comrades, the Kronstadters have raised the banner, and they are confident that tens of millions of workers and peasants will respond to their call" (qtd. in Avrich 199).

The Kronstadt insurrection had shed not a single drop of blood, and merely arrested a few Communist officials, who were treated absolutely correctly; the great majority of Communists... had rallied to the uprising. (Serge 127)

Far from representing the interests of the working class, the Kronstadters were reflecting the pressures of the peasantry, who were becoming increasingly disaffected... After [the introduction of the NEP], there were no more Kronstadts... The peasants had gotten what they wanted. (Grant 59) Nowadays, the Bolsheviks also attack the Kronstadt revolt for being in the interests of capitalism and the counterrevolution. They claim that the program of the revolt was inspired by the petty-bourgeois peasants and sought the recreation of the free market. The fact of the matter is that the Kronstadt's economic demands (which can be found in the Petropavlovsk Resolution) are not extreme. The New Economic Policy (NEP) of Lenin and Trotsky actually went considerably further than the Kronstadt demands towards a restoration of capitalism (Avrich 74). The NEP had been drawn up well before the Kronstadt revolt, and was generally seen

as a necessary and proper retreat. One did not find many Bolsheviks accusing Lenin of counterrevolutionary conspiracy!

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about Kronstadt.

The political demands of the Petropavlovsk Resolution were also the furthest thing from counterrevolutionary as can be imagined. They tend to echo the promises made by the Bolsheviks during 1917 - one of the main slogans of the Kronstadt rebellion was actually a take-off of one of the main slogans of the October Revolution: "All Power To The Soviets, But Not To Parties!" The Kronstadt rebellion fought for equality and basic freedoms. It fought for an end to fear and repression, and for democratic government by representative Soviets. These goals can clearly be seen in the list of demands of the Petropavlovsk Resolution, which many modern-day Marxists seem to have misplaced. The actions of the Kronstadters during their 18 days of self-rule were also committed to these goals; the Resolution was not simply literary posturing (Figs 763).

In its ideology, the mutiny was a return to 1917. (Figs 762)

The first lie is to identify the Kronstadt mutineers of 1921 with the heroic Red sailors of 1917. They had nothing in common. The Kronstadt sailors of 1917 were workers and Bolsheviks. (Grant 56) The last resort of the Trotskyists is to try to claim that the Kronstadters of 1921 were not the Kronstadters of 1917. If this were true, it can be concluded that the Kronstadters really were counterrevolutionaries, not the "pride and glory of the Russian Revolution," and therefore deserved to be destroyed. Unfortunately for the Bolsheviks, it is not true. "[Kronstadt] was in fact a case of the Bolsheviks being abandoned by their own most favored sons" (Figs 762). Israel Getzler, in his book *Kronstadt 1917-1921: The Fate of a Soviet Democracy*, has provided hard statistics to support these claims. According to his research, over 94% of the sailors of the battleships Petropavlovsk and the Sevastopol (the leaders of the mutiny) had been sailors in the Baltic Fleet before 1917. He estimates that 75% of the entire Kronstadt garrison were veterans from before the October Revolution (qtd. in Figs 762). It would be superficial to use only these statistics to refute the Bolshevik claim, of course.

An in-depth analysis of this critical issue is necessary.

Leon Trotsky claims that all the sailors and soldiers at Kronstadt in 1917 had

been sent off to different fronts during the desperate years of the Civil War: "The Baltic Fleet and the Kronstadt

garrison were denuded of all revolutionary forces" (3). This occurred "beginning as early as 1918, and in any case not later than 1919" (Trotsky 3). While this would seem to make a good deal of sense, there are a couple of issues that must be kept in mind. First of all, let us not forget that Kronstadt was "the most important base in Russia... whoever controlled Kronstadt controlled Petrograd" (Grant 58). Victor Serge described news of the White occupation of Kronstadt to be

"frightful because it meant the fall of Petrograd at any minute" (124). It is unlikely that the Bolsheviks would be shortsighted enough to leave Petrograd open to assault by denuding Kronstadt of all its revolutionary elements. Additionally, one can analyze the British assault on Kronstadt near the end of 1919 (after the time given for the original population to have departed). By all accounts, the Kronstadters performed admirably in this battle, which helped to keep Petrograd from falling into the hands of General Yudenich (Stewart 235). This all demonstrates that Trotsky is at least exaggerating Kronstadt's loss of personnel during the Civil War, and is possibly involved in outright falsification.

Ted Grant claims that "the Kronstadt garrison of 1921 was composed mainly of raw peasant levies from the Black Sea region. A cursory glance at the surnames of the mutineers immediately shows that they were almost all Ukrainians" (56, emphasis added). Very well - Mr. Grant's bluff is called.

Paul Avrich analyzed hundreds of surnames of those involved with the rebellion, including the Provision Revolutionary Committee; these are his results:

So far as one can judge from these surnames alone - admittedly an uncertain procedure - Great Russians are in the overwhelming majority. There is no unusual proportion of Ukrainian, Germanic, Baltic, or other names. Yet the picture is somewhat different when one looks at the membership of the Provision Revolutionary Committee, the general staff of the insurrection.

1. Arkhipov 2. Baikov
3. Kilgast 4. Kupolov
5. Oreshin 6. Ososov

7. Patrushev 8. Pavlov

9. Perepelkin 10. Petrichenko

11. Romanenko 12. Tulin

13. Valk 14. Vershinin

15. Yakovenko

Of the 15 committee members, three (Petrichenko, Yakovenko, and Romanenko) bore patently Ukrainian names and two others (Valk and Kilgast) Germanic names. (92) The vast majority of the Provisional Revolutionary Committee is ethnic Russian, and the proportion is even larger among the rank and file of the rebels! Mr. Grant's statement is that the Kronstadters of 1917 had all been replaced with raw Ukrainian peasant levies is obviously incorrect - there was not really any population change at all.

Nor did there need to be a drastic change in population for the Kronstadters to revolt against the Bolsheviks. After all, "the seamen [of Kronstadt] were a traditionally unruly group" (Meijer 848).

While in 1917 the extreme radicalism of the Kronstadt sailors served the Bolsheviks, it worked against them in 1921 - with no fundamental change necessary. Indeed, throughout the Civil War, there were signs that the Kronstadters only tolerated the Bolshevik dictatorship because it was seen as the lesser of two evils:

Although [the sailors] fought for the Reds during the defense of Petrograd, in October 1919, they only did so to defeat the Whites, whom they saw as an even greater evil than the Bolsheviks. Once the Civil War was over, the sailors turned their anger on the Reds. (Figs 761) In fact, friction had been growing between the Bolshevik dictatorship and the Kronstadters for years.

The first signs came immediately after the October Revolution, when Lenin created a cabinet composed completely of Bolsheviks - against the wishes of the Kronstadt Soviet (Avrich 62). The actions taken by the Bolsheviks during the Civil War - although they were tolerated by the Kronstadters - only increased this tension. Kronstadt had a history of revolutionary maximalism dating back before the October Revolution, and had always been discontent under Bolshevik



rule (Avrich 65). No change in population was needed to make this base oppose those it suspected of betraying the revolution.

The Kronstadt rebels of 1921 were essentially the same as those of 1917. The majority of their leaders were veterans of the Kronstadt Fleet... In its personnel, as in its ideology, the mutiny was a return to the revolutionary days of 1917. (Figs 762)

Kronstadt fell in the early morning hours of March 18, 1921. No mercy was shown to the mutineers, while the Bolsheviks celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Paris Commune.

Later that night, some 500 rebels were shot without trial on Zinoviev's orders: the regular executioner refused to do it, so a brigade of teenage Komsomols was ordered to shoot the sailors instead... During the following months 2,000 more rebels were executed, nearly all of them without trial, while hundreds of others were sent on Lenin's orders to Solovki, the first big Soviet concentration camp on an island in the White Sea, where they died a slower death... About 8,000

rebels escaped across the ice to Finland, where they were interned and put to public works. Some of them were later lured back to Russia by the promise of an amnesty - only to be shot or sent to concentration camps on their return. (Figs 767)

The Kronstadt Soviet was disbanded, never to reform. Absolute power was given to Pavel Dybenko, who was appointed commander of the fortress by the government. Throughout the rest of the world, horrified radicals were shattered by the fall of Kronstadt. To their eyes, "there could not be a more conclusive proof that the Bolsheviks had turned into tyrants" (Figs 768).

The political fallout of Kronstadt would come back to haunt the victors of the day. A secret ban on factions within the Bolshevik Party, which was prompted by the Kronstadt revolt, would be used to expel Trotsky from the Party in 1927. In the 1930s, Trotsky's struggle to create his own opposition to Stalin's Soviet Union was hindered by "the ghost of Kronstadt, [which] was raised against him by libertarian socialists who recalled his role in the crushing of the rebellion" (Avrich 229). To combat this ghost, Trotsky invented a number of stories which he tried to use to justify attacking Kronstadt.

Among them are the claims that the revolt had no program, that there had been a

fundamental change in the population at the base, that the rebellion was anti-Bolshevik, and that the rebellion sought the restoration of capitalism, all of which have been refuted. "Moreover, as Dwight MacDonald pointed out, Trotsky never answered the charge that the Bolsheviks handled the revolt with unnecessary intransigence and brutality" (Avrich 230). In the end, Trotsky proved unsuccessful in his bid to create a powerful 'Fourth International,' and Trotskyist parties remain small, sectarian and disunited to this day.

From the beginning, the Bolsheviks sought only to crush Kronstadt. There was no legitimate reason for the bureaucracy to turn on the base - the myths of the White General and émigré plots were invented to justify the suppression. It is true that a sense of paranoia probably motivated Bolshevik actions, but this does not excuse them, especially because new lies were created years after the end of Kronstadt. Even long after it was clear that the Bolsheviks had been mistaken in their attack on Kronstadt, they created new stories to justify their actions, instead of offering the necessary factual analyses.

Kronstadt was not opposed to Bolshevism; Kronstadt was not a threat to the Soviet State. It is quite likely that the "Kronstadt Plan for a Free Russian Government" was the only possible alternative to the horrors of Stalinism. The end of Kronstadt was the end of the Russian Revolution, and the justifications offered by unrepentant Bolsheviks have served only to retard progress and hinder the development of a truly free world.

"What a pity, that the silence of the dead sometimes speaks louder than the living voice"

Emma Goldman

(qtd. in Avrich 228)

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